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AUTHOR Johnson, James H.
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ABSTRACT

Issues and challenges in giving students a voice in the educational process, or motivating them through empowerment, are examined in this monograph. Students whose input is solicited feel a greater sense of ownership with the educational process, which increases their engagement and in turn facilitates school effectiveness. Following an introduction, chapter 1 offers a definition of student voice and a discussion of its evolution. The second chapter presents a review of motivational theories from the psychological and business management perspectives. The correlation between student input and engagement in the school community is examined in the third chapter. Chapter 4 describes strategies for developing student voice, examining three common problems associated with participative management and some experiences of an Oregon high school. A conclusion is that incorporating student voice into the administration requires a coordinated effort among all school community members and is most challenged by the view that student empowerment threatens the administration's power. (22 references) (LMI)

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STUDENT VOICE

Motivating Students Through Empowerment

James H. Johnson

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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OREGON SCHOOL STUDY COUNCIL

1787 Agate Street
University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon 97403
(503) 346-5044
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Preface

As our society moves into the postindustrial age, school administrators face many of the same pressures affecting all levels of society and social institutions. Demands to achieve more with fewer resources require the coordination of every party to the educational process.

Communication, partnership, empowerment, and school- or site-based management flit through discussions, dissertations, and journal articles like leaves in the autumn winds. While these trends receive deserved attention on the professional level, the concepts of teamwork and empowerment often give way to autocracy or neglect whenever the definition of the educational team expands to include students.

No one can afford mediocrity. Life is simply too short not to aim at excellence whether we are planting corn, designing supercomputers, or pulling kids away from the edges of ignorance. In spite of the armies of consultants paying off second homes by selling the "how-to" of doing things right, achieving excellence is a simple process. It begins at the top with a leader who states a goal and gives each member of the team ownership in the process of achieving that goal. With ownership comes motivation and with motivation, the self-imposed responsibility to achieve.

With respect to giving students a voice in this process, the challenge is simple and immediate. If we expect students to achieve, they must be treated as members of the educational team; being a member of a team means having a chance to contribute. Denying students that chance sends them a clear message: what they have to offer isn't needed or wanted or useful.

James H. Johnson is a professional writer whose work has appeared in a number of national magazines. Over the last few years he has increasingly focused his attention on education and the development of training programs. He has worked with a number of Fortune 500 firms including IBM, AT&T, and Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing (3M). He is currently lead instructional designer with Dimensions 2000, an association of industrial trainers based in Springfield, Oregon.

Contents

	Preface	iii
	Introduction	1
1.	**What Student Voice Is and Was**	**4**
	Why and Why Not	4
	Defining "Student Voice"	5
	The Evolution of Student Voice	6
2.	**Motivation through Ownership—Ownership through Input**	**9**
	A Psychological Perspective	9
	Voice, Choice, and Business Management in the 90s	11
3.	**Voice and Engagement in the School Community**	**13**
	Database of Information	13
	Engaging Students with School	15
	Student Governments	17
	Voice and the At-Risk Student	18
4.	**Developing Student Voice**	**21**
	Developing a Plan	21
	Input into Academics	22
	The Pitfalls	24
	Conclusion	**26**
	Bibliography	**27**
	Interviews	**29**

Introduction

> We teach our children one thing only, as we were taught: to wake up.
> We teach our children to look alive there, to join by words and activities the life of human culture on the planet's crust.
>
> Annie Dillard (1986)

Education is typically viewed as something that happens to someone. We have a teacher, we have a student; the teacher teaches the student. The flow of information is unidirectional. The oft-cited idea of a factory comes to mind. Raw youth arrive at receiving, and the shipping dock sends off the builders and keepers of our society—engineers, scholars, truck drivers, doctors, laborers, cooks, teachers, and, perhaps most importantly, taxpayers.

Over the years our factories have been declared to be in a state of crisis. Students graduate without needed skills. Others slip out of side exits, resisting a process that no longer seems relevant or expedient. For many students, schooling seems like a vestigial rite left over from 1950s TV sitcoms. Something to be endured and forgotten.

The dilemmas in education have been described in monetary, moral, social, and even spiritual terms. There are as many proposed solutions as there are problems, maybe more. Each year new programs, partnerships, and workshops have offered answers to the problems with "our kids." Politicians, business leaders, task forces, and consultants mail out their reports and prescriptions aimed at sealing up the leaks in the factory and improving the quality of the end product.

The only group whose voice seems strangely absent in this chorus of ideas and counterideas is that of the students themselves. Strange, when you consider that they are the front line victims of poor education. So what do they think? How do they perceive the root problems? And can their insights improve the effectiveness of proposed solutions?

These questions are difficult to answer because students' perspectives on many school issues are rarely sought or acknowledged. There are a num-

ber of reasons for this: the traditional one-way flow of information, administrators and teachers who fear losing control over the student body, distrust of the students' collective judgment, and lack of precedent. But perhaps the biggest reason is that there doesn't seem to be any reason to get student input. After all, these people are "students," they exist to learn. Why clog the debate with uninformed viewpoints?

In spite of the cubic feet of research findings published each year, education remains an essentially simple process—the transference of skills and knowledge from one mind to another. While educators routinely exchange opinions and share techniques, they rarely pause to ask learners how they're coping or whether a change in delivery might make learning easier or more fun. But students, despite their unfamiliarity with the terms used by professionals, can express their satisfaction with challenges such as those requiring higher-order thinking. Robert B. Stevenson (1990) quotes one such teenager:

> When [you] decide based on considering evidence and different points of view, you know you've made a good decision because you've seen both views. . . . The reward is when, after you reach a conclusion, you can articulate your position, knowing you've examined all sides of the issue.

Along with the design of the learning steps, teaching styles can also benefit from critiques given by those judges who sit and watch the teacher's performance day after day after day. Richard and Patricia Schmuck (1991) listed the behavior styles of teachers that students in their survey listed as examples of good teaching. These included giving the students respect, being patient, making the subject interesting, listening to students' questions, and making changes in class to help students learn.

The students may not have used words like *rapport* and *cooperative learning*, but their insights on effective curriculum delivery seem cogent, relevant, and, more often than not, ignored.

This lack of emphasis on student voice and input, common in many schools, has two results. First, important information about the curriculum—its design and delivery—are not available to the faculty. Second, students respond to the school administration's disinterest in student opinions by disengaging themselves from the school community. Both hurt the school, the student, and society.

This Bulletin is not a review of the beliefs and feelings of students; they should be allowed to speak for themselves. Instead, it discusses the dynamics of receiving input from the rank and file members of a community, in this case, the school community. As we'll see, the act of obtaining input has repercussions that go beyond the value of the information itself, which

*can be considerable. Students whose i*nput is solicited feel a greater sense of *ownership with the educational proces*ss, and this, in turn, increases student *engagement in all aspects of school. I*t is this engagement that will ensure the *effectiveness of the school community* and, therefore, an educator's effectiveness in teaching our kids.

If we hope to awaken in our chi*l*dren the belief that they matter, that their feelings and insights have meani*n*g and relevance, then we must listen. Doing so demonstrates our high expec*t*ations of them, and when they understand our faith in them, almost anythi*n*g is possible. As Warren Bennis (1976) pointed out, "In a study of sch*o*olteachers, it turned out that when they held high expectations for their studen*t*s, *that alone was sufficient to cause an increase of 25 points in the students' I.Q. scores*" (Emphasis in original).

Chapter 1

What Student Voice Is and Was

Discussions about student voice typically evoke issues common to other types of speech and empowerment. Underlying the discussion are ideas about political control, freedom of expression, and even human rights. The result is often a contentious perspective about student voice and its role in the schools.

Why and Why Not

The concept of soliciting input seems to make sense: Ask the students what they think, get them to take a more active role in the school community. Have them form committees, evaluate, plan, interact. Who could possibly object? But think back a few decades and replace the word "student" with "black" or "Native American." Social institutions, even those in democratic societies, often resist input from those on the lower levels of the organizational hierarchy. Information and goals flow downward; leaders lead, the rest follow. And children, the saying goes, should be seen and not heard.

The foregoing perspective may seem outdated, but in too many schools the pupils have little or no say in issues that directly affect their school environment and, subsequently, the quality of their education. Addressing the educational crisis seems to be the sole responsibility of educational professionals. As Ernest Boyer of the Carnegie Foundation said, "Throughout the entire scheme of the [education] reform movement, students are rarely mentioned" (cited in Desmond Leatt 1988).

The issue of student voice is a subject in which a person's preconceptions—about the student's role and predisposition to take advantage of the system—usually dictate their feelings. One who believes that most students

are responsible and motivated feels differently about student voice than someone who sees kids as protohumans seeking any excuse to avoid work and cut classes. Is student input an effective management tool or the breeding ground of anarchy? Undoubtedly, each may be true at different times, but it is also true that, in general, levels of student voice reflect student engagement in the school community. Engagement, in turn, determines the level of a student's motivation.

The real issue confronting educators, therefore, is not whether to allow student voice, but how to use student input to advance the academic mission of the school.

Defining 'Student Voice'

To borrow from the electronics vernacular, voice is feedback. Almost anything students do or say can be considered feedback, from scrawling graffiti on the bathroom walls to writing petitions and voicing concerns at school board meetings. Even the singular term *student voice* may be a misnomer given the many cliques and subgroups found within every student body: the jocks, the brains, the techies, the stoners, each of whom has vastly different outlooks and concerns. P. A. Cusick (1973), in his book *Inside High School: The Students' World*, described adolescent society as "a fragmented series of interest groups" and one in which "cross-communication among adolescents may be very limited."

Formal and Informal Voice

When we think of student voice, we usually think of student councils and other formal student organizations like student courts, newspapers, and advisory panels. But a complete definition accounts for all the ways students seek to communicate, such as teacher/student conversations and what the students tell their parents. Other forms of voice are choice of elective classes or whether to engage in extracurricular activities. Within the classroom, students' feelings find an outlet when they engage in cooperative learning (small group exercises) or are allowed to choose a topic for independent study. Each of these instances allows students to exercise some management of their educational process.

So voice, in other words, can be considered as any activity in which the students exercise a degree of independence and control or communicate their feelings and identity to the school community.

Students Make the Most Important Decision

Because student voice influences every school community, the

school's leaders need to manage this resource as carefully as any other. While it may seem as though administrators and teachers decide how much voice to allow, in fact students are the final arbiters. They alone make the most important of all educational decisions: whether or not to stay in school, and if they choose to stay, whether to learn.

The Evolution of Student Voice

Formalized student voice, in the form of student government, has been practiced for centuries, albeit sporadically. Plato's Academy was largely run and maintained by students, the president being elected by the students. In the 1770s, the College of William and Mary had a form of student government, a practice that spread to a few other colleges.

> Only the hopelessly reactionary teacher or the outmoded administrator now feels that student participation in school management is a fad. Student participation in the management of school activities has amply justified its place in the democratically administered school.
>
> Source: National Association of Secondary School Principals (1955)

In this country, student government in the secondary schools began in 1894 at the George Junior Republic School in Freeville, New York. In 1930, William McAndrew, a former superintendent of Chicago's schools, wrote that student participation worked by creating responsibility, honesty, and consideration for the general welfare among the students (NASSP 1955). Throughout this century self-government was largely seen as a way to educate students about the duties and responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy, a role student governments and councils are still expected to play, as we'll see. In general, however, students were delegated only the most ancillary aspects of government. For example, back in the 1950s an effective student government was thought to be one that

> controls the student activity budget; prepares and presents, under faculty guidance, an excellent series of assemblies; conducts a lost and found department; aids in ushering at school events; helps maintain good citizenship in the lunchroom; furnishes monitoring service during the passing of classes; or acts as a clearinghouse and forum for the consideration of student activity problems. (NASSP 1955)

Student Power

In the late 1960s, spurred by unrest on college campuses and best-selling books like *Crisis in the Classroom*, educators began to revise their concepts of student government. At the time, the debate centered on issues of empowerment, with the student body and administration behaving more like

adversaries locked in binding arbitration than partners in education. The fundamental values of educator and educated, split by the generation gap, were so far apart that issues of student voice took on the trappings of the civil rights struggles complete with Supreme Court rulings.

> In our system, state-operated schools may not be enclaves of totalitarianism, school officials do not possess absolute authority over their students. Students in school as well as out of school are "persons" under our Constitution. They are possessed of fundamental rights which the state must respect. (*Tinker v. Des Moines*, 393 U.S. 503 [Iowa 1969])

The growth of student power through the 1970s inspired students to appropriate any power administrators would yield. The struggle was one of "liberation" from academic "tyranny." Achieving the goals of the educational system became an afterthought. Resolutions, like the following passed by the National Education Association in 1970, were common.

> The National Education Association believes that genuine student involvement . . . is possible if students are guaranteed certain basic rights, among them are the following: the right to free inquiry and expression; the right to due process; the right to freedom of association; the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and petition; the right to participate in their governance of the school, college and university; the right to freedom from discrimination; and the right to equal educational opportunity. (Cited in Yarnel 1972)

In Oregon, the State Board of Education, under Verne Duncan, acted to get input from student representatives. Two students—one representing the high schools and another representing the community colleges—were selected to sit on the state board, and twelve students were selected to serve on a superintendent's advisory committee. Candidates were chosen in workshops run by the Oregon Association of Student Councils, and the state superintendent made the final choice.

"The concept of adding students," according to the Oregon Department of Education's student services specialist, Don Perkins, "was based on the concept that they alone were unrepresented, and they were." After a period of time the board decided to also include a teacher and a school administrator. "It's my personal belief that when they added the teacher and administrator advisers, the student input was down graded. They were up against groups like NICOSA and the OEA, groups with lots of resources that the students didn't have."

This high water mark of student activism quickly passed, however. "If you could draw a graph of student involvement," according to Perkins, "it peaks in the early seventies and slides down from there. Right now, we're about as low as we've been."

School Reform in the 80s

Throughout the last decade the focus was on competitiveness—producing engineers and stopping the erosion of SAT scores. In 1983, the National Commission for Excellence in Education published *A Nation At Risk,* which outlined problems in the schools including inadequate expectations of students, unacceptable teaching standards, and insufficient time spent in the classroom. As Desmond Leatt (1988) wrote, "The report made no mention of students as members of the school's social system. It had nothing to say about leadership provided by student activity programs that include. . .curricular activities such as student government." In 1987, the National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration issued a widely read report, *Leaders for America's Schools.* Again, this report made little reference to students' roles in the reform process. Leatt observed, "Most of the criticisms leveled at schools in that era of reform have failed to acknowledge the vital importance of student activities."

Meanwhile, federal funding for innovative education dwindled; the only projects being funded at the national level were those that promised higher academic achievement. Rarely considered was evidence that student engagement in the school community—a function of student voice—resulted in higher levels of motivation and academic performance. (This subject is explored in more detail in chapters 2 and 3.)

And the 90s?

It seems understood that the perpetual crisis in our schools requires communitywide solutions. While definitions of *community* always seem to include business people, parents, governments, social agencies, and consultants, they rarely extend to the students. This is especially odd considering who loses the most when our factory ships off unfinished goods.

Whether these goods, or their younger siblings, will have any real say in the future depends on many things. Leatt concluded:

> The formal, hierarchical structure of schools with principals, administrators, teachers, and students. . . is a definite obstacle to student leaders participating in decision making in school. Many teachers and administrators resist attempts to involve student leaders in decision making that involves school policy or academic matters. They persist, for example, in enlarging the school curriculum in an attempt to suit what they see as student needs without really discussing with student leaders as to whether the proliferation of courses is wanted. The hierarchical structure of schools does not allow for meaningful discussion over school issues, and many faculty are unwilling to modify existing norms of decision making and problem solving.

Chapter 2

Motivation through Ownership—Ownership through Input

Theories about motivation—the art of getting people to do what you want them to do—apply to virtually all human endeavors. As such, motivation is a well-developed and investigated branch of psychology. Theorists in politics, marketing, and education have all added to the literature of motivational theory and identified factors that help determine a person's level of desire to vote, buy, and learn. Factors in the equation include rewards, perceived values, skills, abilities, culture, personality, environment, and the degree of autonomy or control people feel—their voice, as it were. This can be expressed either through communication or exercising the power to choose.

That people feel better and work harder when they exercise some degree of control over a process seems so obvious that it is often taken for granted and subsequently ignored.

A Psychological Perspective

In 1978, researchers devised a simple, though elegant, experiment to show the link between exercising a choice in a task and an individual's motivation. Edward L. Deci (1980), one of the co-researchers, summarized the methodology and findings:

> Matched pairs of subjects worked on interesting puzzle activities. One member of each pair selected which three of six puzzles he or she would like to work with, whereas the matched subject was assigned

the three puzzles chosen by the first subject. These subjects were run separately so that they did not know about the condition other than their own. We found that those subjects who had choice—who had had a greater opportunity for self-determination—spent significantly more free-choice time involved with the puzzles than did those subjects who had worked on the puzzles without having had choice.

It's a rather simple concept. Give an individual some degree of say and they, in Deci's words, "move the locus of causality" inward, so that they feel more self-determining and more intrinsically motivated.

Controlling Aversive Conditions

Another experiment, often cited in motivation studies, was reported by D.C. Glass and J.E. Singer (1972). Subjects were instructed to complete tasks requiring persistence and attention to details. While the subjects were working, the researchers introduced random and disturbing noise and measured the effect on the subjects' performance. In one stage of the study the subjects were provided with a switch to shut off the noise, but they were encouraged to do so only if the noise became too much. Herbert M. Lefcourt (1973) reports the study's findings:

> The most critical elements in motivation enhancement are ownership and choice.
>
> Source: Cohen (1986)

> Subjects with access to the off switch tried almost five times the number of insoluble puzzles and made significantly fewer omissions in proofreading than did their counterparts who were given no such option to control the aversive stimulation. These differences were obtained despite the fact that the *subjects who had potential control did not actually exercise it.* The mere knowledge that one can exert control, then, serves to mitigate the debilitating effects of aversive stimuli (Emphasis added).

The concept of self-control and input was the subject of another, more direct study conducted by E. Staub and colleagues (1971). Subjects were exposed to varying intensities of low-level electric shocks. In these experiments, subjects' reactions to the intensity of shocks were recorded. In one set of conditions the subjects administered the shocks to themselves and chose the level of intensity. In another, the experimenter delivered and chose the intensity of the shocks. Subjects who were allowed to choose their own shock intensity reported less discomfort at higher levels and endured stronger shocks than did the other paired subjects.

> Humans are not passive agents of environment; they are active agents within the context of the environment.
>
> Source: Deci (1980)

Lefcourt summarizes these experiments by observing that "the reported aversive quality of a stimulus decreases when subjects exercise con-

trol over that stimulus." In other words, when people feel a sense of control, they are less distracted and more motivated to complete the task. In the same manner, motivation is undermined when external factors cause someone to believe that they can't control an event or when negative feedback causes them to doubt their ability.

Beliefs Matter

As Lefcourt points out, it doesn't matter whether an individual is truly free to choose, or has choice over a wide variety of options. What matters is whether they believe themselves to be free. Lefcourt asserts that a belief in (or illusion of) freedom leads to greater motivation, learning, and well-being. "It is possible to conclude then, that with respect to aversive stimulation, perceived control makes a great difference. . . . To submit to however wise a master planner is to surrender an illusion that may be the bedrock on which life flourishes."

When Lefcourt speaks of life, he means all life. In his paper titled "The Function of the Illusions of Control and Freedom," he cites studies indicating rats, dogs, and primates also respond favorably to exercising control over aversive stimuli.

Offering choices, therefore, increases an individual's ownership in a process, and ownership promotes investment of time and energy. Just ask anyone who owns his or her house.

Voice, Choice, and Business Management in the 90s

Business managers and consultants, people responsible for making America competitive again, increasingly cite the importance of the flow of information both up and down the organizational chart. While trends in business management practices are as volatile as *haute couture*, it appears that listening to workers in some industries is becoming an accepted management policy and threatens to become a widespread practice.

Why Managers Listen

Pick up any of the best-selling books describing new management styles and you're sure to encounter thoughts similar to those expressed in Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman's 1982 best-seller *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies*. Listening to the people you serve is almost a given among the companies cited in the book as examples of managerial excellence. According to the authors:

- [The traditional approach] doesn't show how strongly workers can identify with the work they do if we give them a little say-so.

- The excellent companies treat the rank and file as the root source of quality and productivity gain.
- These companies learn from the people they serve . . . . Many of the innovative companies got their best product ideas from customers. That comes from listening, intently and eagerly.

These quotes express three important reasons for listening to subordinates. First of all, listening increases motivation. Second, the increase in motivation is a critical source of gain in quality, whether the task is building cars or improving SAT scores. Third, the rank and file—be they employees, customers, or students—provide excellent insights on the workings of the organization, and successful managers rarely refuse good information.

Parallels in the Schools

The new management style approximates site- or school-based management and teacher empowerment, techniques practiced in many schools. These policies encourage teachers to decide how best to achieve the school's goals. Teachers are provided a voice, and the gains in teacher motivation and productivity help everyone reach the objectives.

So the obvious question is: If site-based management works so well at the teacher level, why not extend the practice down to the students? This is occurring, in a sense, with the increasing popularity of cooperative learning, in which students work in small groups to achieve a teacher-directed outcome. Students in these situations teach themselves, while the teacher's role is to create an environment for that learning to occur. Business people often refer to this as "management by walking around." Group learning approximates small-group activities found in many organizations. One of the most prominent of these activities is quality circles, which are small, informal groups of employees focusing on ways to do their jobs better, a concept often attributed to the Japanese.

While distinctions between the objectives of schools and businesses abound, they are both communities of human beings. As such they conform to the same general patterns of human behavior. Motivation, ownership, and voice represent principles operative in kindergartens, city councils, and model airplane clubs. But when we think of applying these principles to schools, we need to focus on one key issue: How can allowing students to voice their concerns and insights help them learn?

Chapter 3

Voice and Engagement in the School Community

The correlation between input and engagement found in every human community also occurs, not surprisingly, in schools. C.S. Anderson (1985) mentions a variety of studies linking decision-making and leadership with improved communication, student satisfaction, achievement, and higher levels of respect and trust. This link is to be expected given the psychological aspects of motivation and choice we examined in the previous chapter.

> Tell me—I forget
> Show me—I remember
> Involve me—I understand
>
> Source: Chinese Proverb

As we mentioned before, student input does two things. First of all, it creates a database of information that administrators can use in curriculum development and improvement of delivery. Second, it creates among students a sense of ownership and engagement with the school that many children, particularly those at risk of dropping out, otherwise have a difficult time achieving.

Database of Information

One of the foundations of effective communication—be it leadership training, filmmaking, or classroom instruction—is to know your audience. As Claudia Pask-McCartney (1989) pointed out, "It is essential that [designers] have a thorough understanding of the learner's personality as well as his/her feelings and cognitions about him/herself, others, the medium, the task, and the demands of the task."

Teaching Styles

Direct knowledge about who you are teaching ensures the alignment of

the information with the delivery methods. Given a traditional approach to education (one with minimal student input), the only formal method of discovering the perceptions of students is testing with either standardized or criterion-referenced tests. A good score indicates a capable, motivated student, whereas a poor score implies the opposite, an incapable or unmotivated student. In either case, the premise is a unidirectional flow of information, a return to the factory analogy with the student being molded by outside forces. Whether the information took hold or not depends entirely on the student. The teacher's role is ancillary.

> Unfortunately, the research literature rarely addresses students' perspectives as a means of illuminating our understanding of curriculum practice.
>
> Source: Stevenson (1990)

We take for granted that some teachers are more effective than others; they always seem to get the most out of their students. Wouldn't it make sense to allow students to help identify the teaching styles they find to be most effective? It is hard not to conclude that teachers will benefit from this type of information even if they choose not to act upon it.

While a great deal of attention in the reform movement focuses on the academic qualifications of the teachers and the technical sophistication of the curriculum, little analysis has been done on the subjective attributes of teaching style. Clearly, the instructor who creates an emotional bond with students—who excites them and effuses empathy, understanding, and, above all else, respect—can accomplish more than any academic genius who cannot develop a working relationship with the pupils.

The Types of Teachers Students Want

Following their interviews with high school students, Richard and Patricia Schmuck (1991) reported:

> The adolescents we interviewed were not concerned with their teachers' subject-matter competence, breadth of knowledge, or ability to do well in college classrooms. Rather they wanted teachers to be human beings who would show trust, respect, and understanding of youth.

These teaching qualities are possible only when students know a high level of communication exists between them and their teacher. The Schmucks say that "one of the most important conclusions we came to from our interactions with students is the value that listening to students has in lessening their alienation and increasing self-confidence."

Academic competence and showing "trust, respect, and understanding" are sometimes thought to be mutually exclusive. But if a high level of motivation is a prerequisite for academic excellence, and if displaying trust, respect, and understanding creates motivation, then these attributes may be

among the most overlooked in the teacher's tool kit. Students who do not feel the teacher's compassion, particularly when faced with family or social problems, may find it easy to disengage from school. Academic excellence is impossible when a student's body or attention is outside the classroom.

Negotiating Curriculum

No one can force someone else to learn. Although teachers and administrators may believe that they choose the curriculum, this is not completely true. As Stevenson (1990) states, "Classroom observations reveal the important role that students play in negotiating the actual curriculum and deciding what knowledge to accept and what to reject. This role is especially critical in so far as engagement is concerned because it is *the student who decides* whether to become engaged in academic work" (Emphasis added).

A student deciding whether to become engaged in school may be the ultimate form of voice, a veto power no teacher can override. The instructor's only response is creating an environment that stimulates the student to choose engagement.

One teaching method that seems to help students make this choice is cooperative learning, where students work on a project in small groups. They are given minimal groundrules and are free to decide among themselves how to achieve the objectives. The teacher's role changes from an instructor to a facilitator.

The Schmucks reported a good example of this technique in one of the schools they visited. Students, working in groups, had written and illustrated stories for children in kindergarten. On the day the Schmucks visited, the students were selecting the three best stories to be read to the five-year-olds.

> The four stories we saw presented were delightful and creative. The presenters were articulate and well-organized. More important, the rest of the students were captivated, enthusiastic, silly, and having fun. The teacher . . . spoke only to call on each group in turn and to remind the class of its responsibility to pick the best three [stories].

In this situation, the leader, in this case the teacher, creates the environment, sets the goals and groundrules. The students are given autonomy to achieve the goals; in other words, they have "moved the locus of causality inward" and achieved the increases in ownership and motivation.

Engaging Students with School

"Engagement," according to researchers Sandra B. Damico and Jeffrey Roth (1991), "may be thought of as a continuum with integration into the life

of the school on one end and alienation or disengagement on the other." They go on to differentiate between academic engagement—the way students respond to the formal curriculum—and social engagement, which describes how students interact with the school community outside the classroom.

The two are linked in that both serve to integrate the students into the educational process. "Students who are academically and/or socially engaged with their schools' programs," wrote Damico and Roth, "are likely to persist to graduation, while those who are estranged from them are likely to drop out." One of the most accepted means of engaging students with school is extracurricular activities.

Earlier we mentioned that participation in extracurricular activities was a form of student voice, an opportunity for kids to choose and express their identities and interests within a structured school organization. As Damico and Roth point out:

> There is ample evidence that students bond to their high school through their participation in extracurricular activities. Service clubs and athletic teams have long been known to serve as vehicles for students eager to excel in non-academic activities which are valued by the community at large. With this association in mind, one might assume that schools would try everything possible to facilitate participation of low achieving students. However, this emphatically was not the case.

These researchers cite many examples of students who would like to participate in some of these activities but couldn't for various reasons. Some lacked money for uniforms and others required equipment; others couldn't get involved because the club meetings took place outside the normal school day and transportation, therefore, was a problem. Some schools insisted that students attain a minimum GPA before they would be allowed to participate.

The focus of Damico and Roth's study was examining the different levels of engagement in Florida school districts with high and low graduation rates. A high school with a high graduation rate actively "leveled the playing field" and removed barriers to participation in these activities. The researchers reported that the administration "made a commitment to its economically disadvantaged students." For the school band, for example, the principal solicited funds from local businesses to subsidize the purchase of instruments and uniforms, and the entire student body was represented in this highly visible segment of school life. The result was that the band "enjoyed the enthusiastic support of every segment of the populace. There was a powerful incentive to stay in a school whose teams' triumphs and setbacks were followed by nearly everyone in the community."

Student Governments

As mentioned in chapter 1, student government serves as the traditional framework for engaging students with school management. But to focus on the student council as the *sine qua non* of student input runs two main risks. First of all, given the fragmented nature of student societies, elected student leaders may not accurately sense the feelings of the entire student community. Every school seems to have several "informal" student leaders whose views may not coincide with those of the council leaders. Second, student governments rarely become involved with important matters.

> To expect immature pupils to govern themselves without help is unreasonable if not naive; to refuse to grant pupils a share in managing their own affairs constitutes a failure to see the possibilities of training youth . . . under guidance, to participate in democratic processes.
>
> Source: NASSP (1955)

Prom Color Schemes

Another aspect of Damico and Roth's research examined student engagement with school by looking at student reactions to policies and cocurricular activities, one of which was the student council. What they found seems symptomatic of the current status of student voice.

> How skeptical were average students about the people who ran for office? The answer was very. They reported that the same few people, usually the "Preps" (college bound students whose parents knew the value of a service-laden resumé), appeared on the ballot every year. Once elected, these officers did not stand up on behalf of the student body to protest unpopular decisions made by the school or district administrators; instead they busied themselves with innocuous matters such as choosing the color scheme for the prom or the amusement park for senior class night.

Damico and Roth also reported student concern over the considerable costs of campaigning and the advantage students from wealthy families have in these contests, as they did in other extracurricular activities. The student council, ostensibly a tool for teaching students about our democratic traditions, does exactly that, including the apathy and skepticism prevalent in adult politics.

The Schmucks found similar concerns during their interviews with students. "Elected student leaders told us that although they were busily engaged in three or four co-curricular activities, they had little voice in influencing how their school operated. . . . We found no school . . . in which the student council was a key player in any important aspect of school life, except for social events. In most places, administrators told us that the stu-

dent council was ineffective if not inoperative."

The Schmucks quote one principal as saying, "I tried to get [the council] motivated but they just wouldn't do much." Pressed for an example, the principal described how he had asked the council, in November, to get a Christmas tree, but "they didn't bother getting one. So there was no Christmas tree."

But They Can Work

Not all student councils are irrelevant social clubs, but as official school organizations they can only be as effective as the school administrators allow them to be. When provided with serious challenges, student leaders can be surprisingly effective. The Schmucks described one such case in which student leaders from black and white schools in the deep South assisted in the creation of a desegregated school:

> The administrators arranged for the student council leaders of both the black and the white schools to meet together and to establish student policies and programs. As a consequence of those meetings, the students had a voice in shaping the policies of their new school; they produced a student handbook that was endorsed by the administrators. Even today that school district is an exemplary case of racial desegregation.

Examples such as this one, however, seem to be rare exceptions. In most cases student councils exercise little power, don't represent a cross-section of students, and busy themselves with largely inconsequential tasks. This occurs in spite of the fact that student government attracts some of our most capable student leaders.

Mike Bednarek recalls the kids selected as candidates for the Superintendent's Advisory Committee in camps run by the Oregon Association of Student Councils. "We were dealing with Stanford-bound kids," he said. "They typically had lettered in two sports, had 3.4 GPAs, spent time volunteering in the community, and might be president of the Spanish Club. And these kids made important contributions, including substantive recommendations and testifying in front of the legislature."

Voice and the At-Risk Student

Educators, by definition, must work to educate everyone who can learn; each student who fails to graduate represents, to some degree, a failure of the educational system. No one benefits when a kid quits school. High attrition creates higher per capita costs since fewer students are being served, and it results in perceptions of "creaming," whereby more manageable youth

are being served while those most in need are not. In some districts today half of the students are at risk.

The situation in some schools is becoming epidemic. "Most schools aren't even looking at the bottom 15 to 30 percent of kids," according to Bob Semon, a counselor at Springfield High School who recently completed a survey of at-risk programs in over thirty schools. "Schools must focus instead on kids in the middle who want to do something early with parental support. If you focus on the kids on the bottom you'll use up all your resources and lose those kids anyway and maybe some in the middle, kids you might have helped if you'd had the time."

At-Risk Programs and Input

Programs for at-risk youth tend to share certain characteristics. "These programs are highly participatory," according to Richard Schmuck. "The kids are expected to help each other, there's lots of small group activities, and they almost never have the traditional classroom setting." The strategy is to get the students involved with the program, give them a sense of ownership so that they become motivated to succeed. One way this is done is by ensuring that students in the program want to be there. Bend (Oregon) High School, for example, operates its alternative school on a first-come, first-served basis, ensuring that those who are there really want help.

The idea of getting troubled teenagers engaged with their surroundings also operates effectively in Roseburg, Oregon. Students in trouble often do internships in city hall, thereby increasing their engagement to the community at large.

"I think you really get [high levels of] student voice in these special programs," Bob Semon explained. In addition to participation in the classroom, "kids tell teachers about parts of the program they really liked and teachers carry those messages back to the rest of the faculty."

A Day in the Lives of American Children

2,989	children see their parents divorced
1,868	teens drop out of school
1,287	teenagers give birth
1,099	teenagers have abortions
988	children are abused
110	babies die before their first birthday
27	children die because of poverty
5	school age youths are murdered
5	teens commit suicide

Source: Children's Defense Fund, cited in Children's Express Foundation (1989)

Why Kids Stick with It

Several years ago Public/Private Ventures (1989) interviewed students participating in special programs. As with most such programs, some of the

In the school setting, persons who feel ownership for the events in their lives achieve more, come to school more often and are tardy less often compared to those who do not participate in the decisions which affect them.

Source: Cohen (1986) summarizing de Charms

students made it and others didn't. The researchers interviewed the students to uncover reasons for their decisions to either stay or go. What they found was that the reasons given often related to engagement with the teacher, the program, and the other students. Typical comments included "It was like a family, you could say anything you wanted," "You got to know each other," and "[The teacher] encouraged me," and "I used to have a lot of problems and when I told my teacher. . .she [spent] her time on me."

The report determined that the most frequently cited positive aspect of participation was a relationship with a teacher or supervisor or the team spirit in the class or group. Both types of engagement are a direct result of feeling a sense of ownership and participation in the process. In other words, having a voice and having the voice listened to.

Chapter 4

Developing Student Voice

Any management initiative—no matter how lofty the intentions or sound the strategy—involves some level of risk. Misplaced hopes, misunderstandings, and political repercussions can often occur when new policies and procedures are enacted.

A leader's sudden emphasis on student voice can create more problems than it solves. One way to minimize these is to think of and represent student voice as a tool for achieving the school's goals and not as an end in itself. Like all initiatives, good planning is the biggest prerequisite to success.

Each school offers a unique set of circumstances, dictated by the personality of the students and faculty. Since there can be no single blueprint for increasing levels of student voice in every setting, this chapter will instead look at some of the issues that have arisen in other schools and ways to avoid problems commonly associated with participative management.

Developing a Plan

When creating a strategy for achieving input, you may want to start by getting input from teachers and other administrators. You'll need to assess the staff's philosophy concerning participative management and perhaps get their ideas on ways to increase levels of voice.

Success begins with the proper outlook. Arnold Coe, principal of the Powder Valley (Oregon) Schools and a firm believer in the value of student input, said that "it all begins with a sincere respect for student opinion, and some people don't have that." Without a faculty's fundamental commitment to the value of getting input, any attempt to increase levels of voice risk being perceived as hypocritical. As an administrator, you'll need to ensure that everyone involved with this process understands its benefits and sincerely wants to see it work.

A Main Objection to Voice

One question often raised is: If you give students real decision-making power, what do you do when they make stupid decisions? Answering this requires a distinction between input and autonomy.

The fact that someone gives you input or advice doesn't obligate you to follow that advice. As an administrator, your first priority is to the mission of the school, and you must discount suggestions that run counter to that mission. The way to ensure that input aligns with the school mission is to ensure that everyone knows the school's mission.

> I think [the reason why low levels of voice currently exist is] a question of turf. School administrators, like anyone else, have difficulty adjusting to new management styles. Just like there were growing pains in getting teacher input with site-based management, there'll be growing pains in getting student input. People doing new jobs need guidance whether they are teachers, students, or administrators. For them to succeed, they need training since many of these behaviors aren't natural. Students also will need guidance on how to share these management responsibilities.
>
> Source: Michael Bednarek

The secret is effective communication. Voice as a management tool requires that students understand that their participation advances the achievement of the school's goals. It also requires the administration's willingness to allow those contributions and, on occasion, to give students the benefit of the doubt.

Start Small

"You really have to be cautious and ease into it," Arnold Coe said. "There is some risk-taking and you don't want to take big bites. Find some specific issues to work with, develop some confidence, and build on that."

Perhaps the most natural and nonthreatening place to start is with a single nonacademic issue. It can be more compelling than the prom colors. In chapter 3, Richard and Patricia Schmuck described the success of student councils who developed nonacademic policies and procedures to facilitate a school integration effort. Another choice might be establishing a dress code or managing student discipline.

Whatever issue is selected, it must be well defined and the process to be used to arrive at a recommendation must be understood.

> Participative management is but one tool in the management bag. An executive proclaiming to be a "participative manager" is tantamount to a carpenter proclaiming to be a "hammerer." Obviously, a carpenter has and needs a variety of tools in achieving objectives. Similarly, a manager needs a variety of techniques to achieve goals.
>
> Source: Wadia (1980)

Input into Academics

Obtaining student input into academic issues can be more difficult to coordinate because these

issues lie at the core of the school's mission. Also, administrators have a professional responsibility to achieve these goals. Allowing students to determine, for example, the core curriculum may undermine the value of that curriculum. How then can we determine what types of academic input might be appropriate and which might be harmful?

Loose-Tight Properties

These issues parallel those faced by businesses that are using the new management styles. They, too, want workers to provide input into business decisions while advancing the cause of the company as a whole. Peters and Waterman, writing in *In Search of Excellence,* describe the new management style as having "simultaneous loose-tight properties." They say that many excellent companies "have pushed autonomy down to the shop floor. . . . On the other hand they are fanatic centralists around the few core values they hold dear."

> You start by establishing an atmosphere where the kids always have a say-so. You need to eliminate shutoffs even though you may end up with rules you don't like. For example, we had our kids here come up with a dress code; we gave them complete responsibility. They went through the process and ended up right about where the faculty wanted them to, but they had a lot more identification and ownership with the final policy so it was more successful.
>
> Source: Arnold Coe

Applied to a school setting, this style would translate into a central administration fanatical about educational excellence while allowing teachers and students freedom to achieve this goal any reasonable way they choose.

"I think it's useful to distinguish between the goals of education—the things people are supposed to learn—and the process or methods of education," Richard Schmuck explains.

> I don't advocate giving students a lot of voice about the goals or desired outcomes of the educational program. I think these should come from a political process that the adults are involved with as carriers of the culture. But I think the students should have some say in the delivery methods used to try and reach those goals because they are so much a part of that process.

Teaching styles, techniques, and teacher-student relationships are all aspects of the instructional delivery methods that students might assess and help improve.

Students Assessing Teacher Candidates

Other ways to give students a voice in instructional delivery might be to formalize their evaluations of teachers' methods. Schmuck, for example, suggests allowing students to participate in a selection committee for new teachers. Candidates for teaching positions would give a presentation or teach part of a class to a panel consisting of students and teachers. The panel

might rate the candidates based on teaching attributes the student body has identified as being important. This doesn't imply the students would have the final say in the selection, but it would allow them to express their perspectives and feel some responsibility for the type of teaching methods they are exposed to.

Another approach suggested by Schmuck is to have the principal engage students in a discussion about the characteristics of good and bad teaching without singling out any specific teacher. Students could respond to questions such as "What are some of the things teachers do to help you learn?", and "What do teachers do that keep you from learning?" The principal could compile the results and share them in a teachers' workshop. The result could be very constructive and nonthreatening, if handled with sensitivity.

"There is a scary aspect to all this," Schmuck suggests. "Anytime you open yourself to feedback from people who are subordinate to you, you might get some negative stuff that might upset you." The operative word here is "might." In any case, whether an administrator or teacher gets the negative feedback does not change the fact that the negative feedback exists among the students. Like other forms of communication, not sharing the information might be worse than sharing it.

The Pitfalls

Administrators seeking greater student input might learn something from businesses that have applied the same principles to their workers. Maneck S. Wadia (1980), a management consultant, has identified several problems often encountered by participative managers.

Three Common Problems

The first problem arises when managers overemphasize the use of participative management. Clearly there are some instances (a crisis, for example) that require autocratic decision-making. Whether or not to use participative management depends on the objectives, the types of people giving input, and the types of work being done.

A second problem can occur when participative management is confused with democracy. We alluded to this earlier when we said that it's important to distinguish between input and autonomy. Often the main goals of getting input—developing greater levels of ownership and motivation—can be hurt by allowing students to vote on an issue, because voting creates an often disgruntled minority. In schools, as in business, the administrator or manager must exercise the final decision-making authority.

The third concern arises when administrators manipulate the input process for their own benefit rather than for the benefit of the rank and file. An example of this might be an administrator who hand picks a committee that he or she knows will offer or endorse a proposal favorable to the manager. Another example would be a manager hiding behind the veil of participative management to avoid making a tough decision, such as convening a student panel to decide which extracurricular activities can no longer be funded by the school.

Successful administrators are often those who understand how to manage, or manipulate, the decision-making process to achieve specific ends. But using these techniques to manage input from the rank and file often results in losing all the benefits that participative management offers. There really are no hard rules and strategies to follow; like most management initiatives, developing higher levels of student input is an art that requires practice and patience.

One Case

In spring 1991, several teachers at Oregon's Springfield High School proposed polling the students to find out what they thought about school life. The high school exhibits high student turnover and is described by counselor Bob Semon as being "on the opposite end of Lake Oswego, where they have two kids on free lunch and we have 300."

"We wanted something that would be cheap, easy, and quick," according to Dick Mart, one of the teachers who proposed the survey. "We needed two half-hour blocks of time to administer and discuss the results with the students." After the math class compiled the results, four concerns of the student body were identified. One was the school's image. It was not considered to be a nice place to spend the day, and there were problems with litter and stealing. Inconsistent attendance and the school policies and rules were also identified as being of concern. Finally, students identified problems with academic achievement; they rarely completed homework and felt classes were boring.

Although direct effects on the students' feelings weren't quantified, "I think the process of asking them did have an impact," Mart said. "Before, nobody cared much about the litter problem, but after giving the questionnaire and discussing the results I saw one kid drop a candy bar wrapper and about nine other kids jumped all over him. That never happened before."

Conclusion

Incorporating student voice into the administration of the school community is not a stand-alone technique to be added to an administrator's menu of options. It is instead an aspect of human relations, a function of a community operating in a coordinated way to achieve a measurable goal.

Developing a high level of coordination requires an alignment of purpose and function among every member of the community. When people understand their roles in achieving shared goals, they take it upon themselves to make the contributions that make a community function.

Without a doubt, the biggest obstacle to allowing students to contribute is the view that the empowerment of students threatens the power of the administration. This view assumes that empowerment is a finite quantity, and if one party achieves it, it must be because someone else relinquished it. But there are no limits to empowerment, just as there are no limits to achievement and desire. The fact remains that input motivates the students, and a motivated student body—one that understands and is focused on achieving the school's goals—is an empowered one. An administration managing an empowered student body is likewise empowered.

This synergistic mix of increasing ownership, motivation, and achievement will help to revolutionize our schools, or at least ensure the success of the many other revolutions proposed, and sometimes implemented, after each new task force report and legislative initiative.

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